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SUBJECT: THE OTHER MOROCCO PART 1, POLITICS: THE TRUST GAP

REF: A. RABAT 151

[1](#)B. 08 RABAT 250

[1](#)C. 07 RABAT 1394

[1](#)D. 07 RABAT 1864

[1](#)E. 07 RABAT 1504

[1](#)F. 08 RABAT 570

[1](#)G. STATE 26706

Classified By: PolCouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a winter visit to the Middle Atlas Mountains, PolOff encountered poverty, accusations of local governmental inefficiency, and anger over slow response to weather-related crises. Citizens have an ingrained and almost reflexive distrust of government and worry about endemic corruption and clientalism, despite tangible and constructive efforts on the part of authorities. Officials noted that powers are being transferred to local councils, which have been reticent in taking them up. Electoral politics remains dominated by vote buying, as demonstrated by one contact who expressed glee at the prospect of income from selling his vote. Despite anger and lack of trust in officials, the region remains stable and generally loyal to Mohammed VI. End Summary.

The Middle Atlas Mountains:
Part of the "The Other Morocco"

[1](#)2. (C) From February 3-6, PolOff visited the rural Middle Atlas region between two parallel mountain ranges that divide the more prosperous coastal agricultural plain from the Sahara. The largely Amazigh (Berber) mountain region was a bastion of anti-government rebellion under both the French and former King Hassan II, and thus suffered deliberate neglect from both. PolOff's visit came one day after current monarch Mohammed VI spent a symbolic two-night visit in the local village of Anfghou. Three years prior, in winter 2006, 34 people died there of exposure. The village became imprinted on the national consciousness as a symbol of "the other Morocco" because, as one local man said, "city Moroccans were shocked at the deaths and at pictures of Moroccan children walking around in rags with their genitals hanging out in this day and age."

[1](#)3. (C) For residents, the 2006 events reinforced their feelings of betrayal by the government. During the winter of 2006, local leaders contacted Spanish NGOs for help, having been dismissed by Moroccan agencies. The Spaniards led an aid caravan, which was initially blocked by embarrassed area officials, to the village. Mohammed Ajghough (protect), a local Berber activist and International Visitor Program alumnus who helped guide the Spanish convoy, described a night-time race in four-wheel-drive vehicles through snow to circumvent the checkpoints. Only after the Spaniards returned home and broke the story in European media, was Moroccan aid sent to the community. Three years on, Mohammed Ouaziz, a subsistence farmer in another nearby mountain town,

Tikajouine, dismissed the King's two-night stay in Anfghou to PolOff with surprising venom in a country where the monarch is generally revered, "He (the King) spent two days in a heated tent, inaugurated an empty clinic and went home to his palace."

Government Builds Infrastructure, But Not Trust

¶4. (C) The Government insists it has invested significant resources and effort into improving the quality of life in rural Morocco, and integrating it into the broader national development plan. Mohammed Atalabi, Secretary General (appointed Lieutenant-Governor equivalent) of the High Atlas district of Beni Mellal said that almost every village has access to potable water, a significant accomplishment for a developing country. At a total cost of USD 3 billion, the National Rural Electrification Program ended in 2008, raising national electrification rates to almost 100 percent (Ref B).

Power pylons can be seen marching across even the most remote hillsides and deserts throughout the country. He also said that local authorities and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) were working hard to improve services, and added that most villages have a clinic or school.

¶5. (SBU) In October 2007, the King paid his first visit to Anfghou to check on progress after the 2006 catastrophe. When he found that his orders to improve the road between the village and the provincial seat had not been carried out, he fired the governor (a royally appointed regional administrator) on the spot. In late 2008, over 100 national,

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regional and local officials were dismissed or arrested for malfeasance or abuse of office. However, these and other actions still seem not to have assuaged locals' feelings of disconnection or mistrust of government motives. In winter 2008/2009, following near unprecedented rain and snow, 600 homes in the Atlas collapsed and 300 people died from weather-related incidents.

Thanks, But...

¶6. (C) Farmer Ouaziz in Tikajouine, said that he welcomed electricity to his village, but could not afford to pay the monthly fees; although he admitted to pirating power from the new lines. Fatima Drimine, a community activist, said that the local school and clinic were "no more than walls." Heavy snowfall and lack of road clearance prevented nurses or teachers from reaching the village during winter, and the local nurse would not provide services without a bribe. Both government officials and residents bemoaned a lack of sufficient ambulance services. (Note: By chance, PolOff saw several old ambulances bearing the phrase "A gift from the people of the United States of America," in use several times on roads. End Note.)

¶7. (C) The neighborhood of Mcharmou sits on the banks of a sewage filled stream near the modestly developed mountain town of Azrou. In 2007, the community signed an agreement with the National Human Development Initiative (French acronym INDH - The King's flagship national development program) to provide homes with drinking water. The community was to contribute 30 percent of the financing and INDH the rest. Six months after the agreement was signed, the MOI district office informed the community that it was reversing the financing ratio, and the project died. "How can we trust anything the government says about what it's doing for us in light of our experience? Why would we vote or participate in anything?" one resident asked.

Residents: We Have to Pay to Play

¶8. (C) In a recurring refrain, Mohammed Ataoui, a municipal employee and community organizer in the Middle Atlas mountain town of Tounfite reserved special ire for local officials who, he said, only provided services to villages whose residents could afford to pay bribes to functionaries. Sitting in his modest home on February 4, Ataoui and the former sheikh (tribal leader) of Tounfite described a system whereby even basic services such as garbage collection, social services and snow removal were governed by a complex web of bribery and influence peddling.

Officials: Who's In Charge, the MOI or Elected Councils?

¶9. (C) The next morning PolOff met with the Caid (district-level MOI executive) and Chief Gendarme (state police district chief equivalent) of Tounfite over coffee. They were remarkably pragmatic and professional about the economic and social issues facing the area, placing improved education and skills-based training at the top of the list of priorities. They both denied playing favorites, saying they were hamstrung by "nonexistent" resources. The Caid, a young man in his mid-thirties recently graduated from the MOI's training academy (Ref A) explained that he had two trucks with which to plough almost 200 road miles in his district. In the snowy winter, keeping the main roads open required all of his vehicular resources, leaving little time to open secondary routes.

¶10. (C) In response to a question about local councils' professionalism, the Caid shrugged uncomfortably and said that "in the new Morocco" the MOI had little influence or control over councils' behavior and could not force them to do their jobs. This mirrored subsequent comments made by Secretary-General Atalabi of Beni Mellal who said that the elected local council controlled the budget and operations in "the new democracy." However, Rachid Fadili, the Director of Information Technology at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a community activist in his spare time said such statements were disingenuous. "Interior still dictates policy and procedure, only now by telephone instead of by public order," he explained. "When protesters demand better services or express anger," he continued, "they march on the Wilaya (MOI seat) not the council." However, in southern Morocco, President of the Tiznit Town Council, Abdellatif Ouammou, told PolOff during a November 2008 visit that councils had

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more authority than they realized, but did not know how to utilize it. He added that MOI officials are accustomed to giving instructions and local elected officials are used to obeying them. "Change will take time," he cautioned.

... And This Little Vote Went to Market

¶11. (C) In every meeting with residents, without exception, interlocutors responded with scorn when asked whether they would vote in the June 2009 municipal elections. One woman spat on the ground. Other people laughed out loud. Only one man that PolOff met was enthusiastic about the upcoming elections saying happily, "I need some money, and it's time to take my vote to market." He did not care who bought it as long as they paid his price. He hoped to increase his bid to at least 250 dirhams (USD 29), up from the 100 dirhams (USD 11) he received in the 2007 parliamentary elections. This time, because high participation was important to the government, which wants to increase the low rates of the 2007 parliamentary voting (Ref C-E), he hoped to command a premium. All welcomed increased participation of women in electoral politics, but there was little confidence the system would become more responsive as a result.

¶12. (C) At the same time, many communities and individuals seemed to lack a sense of social and political entrepreneurship, looking almost exclusively to government or outside actors, even the U.S. Government, to fix problems or dispense largesse. Interlocutors also seemed unwilling to shoulder some of the blame for participating in electoral corruption and clientalism themselves.

Ingredients for Unrest, But Still Calm

¶13. (C) Despite expressions of intense bitterness and disenchantment, the Middle Atlas remains generally calm. However, at one point in February, protestors angry at the MOI for its slow response to weather related crises began attacking aid trucks and official vehicles with large rocks, leading to a suspension of deliveries for a few days. Other towns also witnessed protests of varying sizes over services. Mohammed Ataoui in Tounfite said that, "At least here we can complain to the Government and protest if we are upset, even if they do not listen." For all the criticism, many credited the King with providing a sense that there is a court of final appeal beyond bureaucrats. "If we scream hard enough, or have a riot, he will come and inaugurate projects," a woman commented. Many interlocutors did say, however, that if they did not begin to see real change in five years or so, expressions of discontent would become less peaceful and more destructive, referring to past events in Sidi Ifni (Ref F). Agronomy professor Said Kamel recognized that while, "many ingredients for an explosion are there, the system is flexible enough for now that it bulges to contain anger."

Comment - All Politics Is Local:

¶14. (C) In the Middle Atlas region, whether justified or not, citizens perceive their government as inefficient and uncaring. Despite sweeping royal and ministerial rhetoric, and strategic national-level shifts, until corruption is brought under control and local services improve, it is unlikely that trust in government will grow. As a result, it is also likely that turnout in the upcoming local elections may be as low as, or lower than, in 2007 (Ref G). Despite government efforts, many Middle Atlas residents still seem unwilling to give reform the benefit of the doubt. End Comment.

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